

Transcript of *Frontiers of Commoning*, Podcast #42

Interview with Hannes Gerhardt
Professor of Geography at University of Western Georgia
September 1, 2023

Gerhardt: [00:00:00] I find that people tend to be very open to and eager to embrace any approaches where they're given the power to make decisions, and they're very skeptical, especially in the United States, of the state and of a top down bureaucratic approach to things. And so, it's kind of surprising to me that there hasn't been more of a push within the political realm to reframe the discourse towards decentralizing power, empowering communities, and giving people more say in where our wealth and resources go.

Announcer: This is *Frontiers of Commoning* with David Bollier.

Bollier: My guest today is Hannes Gerhardt, a professor of geography at the University of West Georgia in the U. S. who studies political geography and geoeconomics. I'm excited to be talking with him today about his new book, *From [00:01:00] Capital to Commons: Exploring the Promise of a World Beyond Capitalism*. Gerhard's book has the audacity to explore how commoners might leverage digital technologies and open source practices to usher in a post-capitalist world.

Twenty-five or thirty years ago, that sensibility was in the air. The internet was associated with a giddy sense of social emancipation and political possibility as the World Wide Web arrived, along with a surge of socio-technical innovation: free and open-source software, the blogosphere, wikis, peer-to-peer file sharing, creative commons licenses, and countless other experiments in collaboration and sharing. Today that sense of experimentation has faded in the face of big tech monopolies, manipulative data algorithms, digital surveillance of our personal lives, social media disinformation, and savage inequalities in wealthy societies.

This has led Gerhardt to wonder, 'Why does the human race continue to [00:02:00] face such intractable and unevenly distributed problems such as widespread poverty and ecological destruction despite having such tremendous knowledge and material capacities?' Today we'll take a look at the rise and capitalist capture of digital culture and consider how commoning and technology might help engineer a transition out of capitalism. For Gerhardt, it's useful to talk about a framework he calls "compeerism", which he uses to showcase the counter-capitalist possibilities.

Hannes, I'm thrilled to be talking with you and learn more about your perspectives on how the digital world might evolve. Tell me a bit about 'compeerism' and why you see that as a useful lens for thinking about things.

Gerhardt: Thanks for having me, first of all. I kind of invent the term 'compeerism' to refer to a nascent, perhaps not fully self-aware movement or rationality that embraces the idea that our economy needs to be transformed from one based on capitalist markets in which exchange-value monopolizes all conceptions [00:03:00] of value or what it has worth, to one centered on fostering the commons and commoning.

And as you noted, to me, technology plays an important role in this shift to a commons-based economy. And so the closest thing that I could find there was this idea of a commons based peer production. That term, however, I feel, falls short because it's used differently by different people and it stays relatively focused on just the digital, and I feel that the key to harnessing technology lies in recognizing all the barriers that lie in the way of really being able to harness it to reach its full potential.

Bollier: In some ways, you point out that compeerism conflates a lot of terms from peer-to-peer production to the commons and commoning to the political intentionality of trying to challenge capitalism.

Gerhardt: So I think that by making the term an '-ism,' there comes with that a certain sense of [00:04:00] ideology, I suppose. Now, I'm not really presenting it as a kind of vanguard ideology at all. And in the book, I talk really more about how it's more post-ideological and open to many different interpretations and approaches to action.

But I do find that it is necessary to combine this idea of harnessing technology to expand the commons with a political project. Because in the end there are going to have to be changes in broader structures of how we govern ourselves to allow that kind of transition to happen.

Bollier: What I enjoyed about much of your book was how seriously it takes a lot of the political and ideological approaches of the past in confronting capitalism, but it doesn't fully embrace them. And indeed, your book is very aware of how we're in a different era.

Talk a little bit about how you found certain things valuable in Marxist analysis, for example. or anarchism, or democratic socialism, but, ultimately, you think that we need to talk about compeerism as [00:05:00] something different from each of these, while perhaps having strands of each of those.

Gerhardt: I think that all of those strands offer some really valuable lessons. I find that the more optimistic approaches to technology and its relationship to the commons comes really primarily from journalistic writers and not so much from academia. Yet there's a lot of really good work out there. In some cases, where I think that it falls short, though, is in acknowledging capitalism and capitalism's ability to constantly kind of undermine and ultimately absorb these various commoning efforts so that the commons can never really establish the type of breadth, I guess, to offer a real alternative.

And so that's where I find that, especially the autonomous Marxists, that have also engaged the commons in some ways, are a lot more aware of the challenges, and to some extent, really so aware that they're almost crippled by them, and, that's where I feel that they kind of lose fully [00:06:00] the optimism that was there by the more journalistic approach, which I think is not really necessary, [it] kind of paralyzes us and doesn't enable us to move forward. And then with regard to the socialist approach, I do feel that the state needs to be engaged in a transition, I don't think that it could happen without changing how the state works. But I do think that this focus on the commons is a distinct thing from socialism, where the idea is just an expanded state and state-run public entities.

Obviously, the commons being kind of a more grassroots community based approach is different in its conception of how things should be governed from that kind of top-down approach.

Bollier: What I appreciated in your book was how you brought the commons perspective front and center and gave it a broad, comprehensive application.

You're obviously familiar with so much of the literature, both academic as well as the more notable journalism. And that was refreshing to me because you grounded your analysis in a lot of examples. You deal with the realities of internet technology as something that [00:07:00] are decentralized and bottom-up and working with a different logic than conventional liberalism or even socialism, both of which tend to be state-focused and policy driven.

So, for me, you're opening up a clearing in the forest for thinking about transformational possibilities that the technologies have in concert with social action, which of course many technologists are blind to or don't even address how social movements and practice might be important elements to discuss.

Gerhardt: I think that's true, although the examples that I tried to highlight, there is an intentionality, a political intentionality there. I think you're right, though, that on a larger scale, those that are focusing on technology who see it as a force in and of itself that's going to bring about a transition or a transformation of our economy or society, that that's quite wrongheaded. You know, the technology in and of itself won't do that. It will require people and ultimately social movements to employ the technology, and ultimately also to [00:08:00] rewrite and reinvent the technology because a lot of this technology of course is geared towards a particular purpose within the capitalist structures. And so to employ this technology for the commons will require to rejig it in many cases and hack it in various ways.

I think that is happening on a small scale, but of course that would have to happen on a much larger scale.

Bollier: I'd like to get into some of those different theaters of action, you might call it, in a more particular way. I'd like to first start off with the sense of possibility that was so rich twenty-five or thirty years ago. I think of something like John Perry Barlow's famous Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace, in which he had lines which now seem kind of fatuous, but were really quite stirring in an earnest way back then. Lines like,

“Governments of the industrial world, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from cyberspace, the new home of mind on behalf of the future. I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we [00:09:00] gather.”

And it was essentially a very bold, grandiose assertion of the sovereignty of cyberspace, which of course we've seen was kind of naive in terms of the way things have played out with corporations and capital and markets and the state coming to dominate so much of the internet.

Maybe you could talk a little bit about that history and its evolution over the past few decades.

Gerhardt: I think that there were various hopes and aspirations when it came to what the internet could bring. I think some of it was anti-statist where it was really this hope that this would enable a space that could not be controlled by the state.

For some, it was more focused on civil society, and ultimately the commons, and this idea that perhaps the internet could find a way out of capital and capitalism. I think both of those things have proven to be very difficult to achieve. For the state, I mean, we have seen that states are very much able to control and [00:10:00] undermine the internet and the digital information that it contains.

You know, as it is, applied to the economy, capital was very quick to find its opportunities. Now, certainly there were many challenges to capital as we could see with the record industry or the encyclopedia industry, but they were obviously also quick to realize that there was lots of potential here, and they worked quickly to then enclose the internet and find ways of making it profitable, primarily by making the information that's entailed within it scarce in some way.

Bollier: We saw that, of course, with the famous copyright wars over the extension of the length of copyrights and asserting a broader scope for them in digital rights management or DRM as a wall to stop easy sharing, which of course is the natural propensity of things, the so-called 'information wants to be free' notion.

So how robust are the collaborative and commons alternatives, or do they simply exist at the sufferance or indulgence of corporations?

Gerhardt: I think that capital has [00:11:00] dominated the cyberspace, for sure. But I don't think that means necessarily that there's no way to challenge that dominance. And so, I feel that those that were so hopeful about the internet and the digital revolution kind of that it enabled, what they failed to see was this ability of this information being enclosed and the various barriers of really freeing that information, right?

Just because the technology is there doesn't mean it's going to be free. Obviously, that's unfortunate because the impetus for that hope was that really the digital revolution enables this massive abundance that, like you said, could theoretically be shared on a massive, massive scale that would not only allow for all kinds of knowledge and know-how and information to be shared, but for that to ultimately also work its way through into the material economy.

I think there are various efforts still at work in trying to maintain the internet as having a commons-basis. I mean, the [00:12:00] internet is still governed in some ways, in a way that it's moved a bit from its original intent, obviously, but, there's still a kind of a commons-based governance to it, even if capital has become very important in that.

And of course, there are lots of efforts that are underway where the internet is being used to further the commons. There are again barriers to this, but there's a lot of hopeful work that's happening as well.

Bollier: Well, let's talk about some examples in terms of the hopeful signs and maybe those commons that have come under the thumb of capital.

Yochai Benkler, the Harvard law professor, regarded peer to peer production as a supplement or complement to capitalism, you might say, as opposed to necessarily a transformational force. Whereas other people such as Michelle Bowens of the Peer-to-Peer Foundation and others regard peer production and commons as maybe transformative.

Could you give some examples on both sides of the ledger?

Gerhardt: In some ways, when the P2P Foundation and Michelle Bowens, when they talk about the transformative ability of the internet, [00:13:00] they often point to activities and initiatives like Wikipedia, for example. So you have a whole bunch of people that get together and largely volunteer their labor to create a commons resource which is shared by everyone.

That has tremendous potential as we can see with Wikipedia. I mean, it is a tremendous resource. The problem is trying to expand that into multiple other realms. And I think that it's possible to do that, but we then all kind of immediately run into the normal problems that any kind of commons-based activities have, which is, you know, we can't just be dependent on voluntary labor. At some point, everybody needs to feed themselves. In the end, we're all dependent on the market to access our housing and our shelter and our clothing. And so, there are these structural limits that really hinder an explosion of this peer to peer type of production that is envisioned by Bowens and the P2P Foundation.

And so, I guess what I tried to do [00:14:00] in the book is to point at some of these efforts, like, obviously, like Wikipedia, but there's many, many more. To show the potential that they have, but then to point to the greater barriers that are still there that have to be taken into this calculus of how to liberate this technology.

Bollier: So maybe let's talk about things like platform cooperatives and digital autonomous organizations. What promise do you see in those?

Gerhardt: Platform cooperatives are great. I think generally the cooperative model is something that lines up really well with commons and commons-based governance. And so the idea here is to set up a cooperative; it could be very different types of cooperatives, different types of activities. Obviously, you're well aware of these and many of them are laid out quite well in *The Commoners Catalog [for Changemaking]* that just came out. You know, the idea here is that the governance of the entity is going to be shared and that it's generally not for profit or if there are profits then those are shared.

And it's a [00:15:00] way to avoid the more predatory type of platforms that currently dominate. And I think there's a lot of potential to these cooperative...these platform cooperatives. The challenge as with any cooperative, though, is to find a niche where they can find at least enough resources to keep going as it often is that with commons-based economic activities.

And so while the internet offers them a good bit of benefits in terms of having that access to a large group of people, it's still very difficult to kind of elbow your way in once there are established capital platforms that have a lot of marketing power and things like that.

Bollier: It seems like the double identity of being both a market player as well as a commoner or aspirational commoner is a difficult thing to navigate because ultimately platform cooperatives

need to keep the revenue coming in, and the temptation is to become just another market player, which has its benefits, of course, but it's just not as transformational [00:16:00] as some people might wish.

Gerhardt: Right. So, I think that the idea of compeerism that I lay out is something that it shares with commons-based peer production, at least the way that the P2P foundation expounded, is the idea that commons based entities really ultimately need to be able to out-compete capitalist for-profit entities in the marketplace. And the way to do that, because it's very difficult obviously, and this is what Rosa Luxemburg pointed to about cooperatives in general, it's very difficult if the entity is not willing to engage in exploitative tactics that the capitalists are engaged in.

And so the argument I make is that there are a number of aspects, I suppose, to the digital revolution that need to be harnessed by the commons in a way that could benefit them vis-a-vis capital. And so one of the things that I talk a good deal about is the importance of peer-to-peer property and peer-to-peer [00:17:00] licensing.

For example, if you have a commons entity that produces something of value, that they can put that under a peer licensing, that means that other commoners are able to use it for free, but a capitalist entity would not be able to use it or would have to pay for it. And so, in ways like that, commoners and compeerist entities need to position themselves in a way where they are able to leverage their kind of advantages by cooperating and engaging in tactics like that to really be able to offer something that market-based actors for-profit actors are not able to do.

Bollier: In other words, to assert themselves as commoners and control how the capitalist world might use their works. I notice the difference between openness, which allows anybody, including capitalist players, to take the wealth that's generated, versus commons, where there's a certain amount of control and where the privileged beneficiaries are those who [00:18:00] contributed to making it in the first place.

Is that the kind of distinction that you're talking about?

Gerhardt: Yeah, that's basically the distinction. I mean, there [are] various ways of doing it. An example of it being if there's an entity that is producing something of cultural value, that they would make that available for free to commons-based entities, but if somebody wanted to use it for-profit, that they would have to pay for it. That secures a source of revenue that then can be distributed among those that created it.

Bollier: I'm reminded of an essay by Dmytri Kleiner, a famous programmer, about open source communities managing themselves precisely in that way, and even, as he calls it, 'transvesting' money from the capitalist world into their common shared endeavors.

That strikes me as a really interesting conceptual model for how it might work.

Gerhardt: So, Dmytri Kleiner was one of the original thinkers of this idea of peer property and needing to protect commons-based work [00:19:00] from capital enclosure and capital cooptation. And I think it's a very valuable lesson that I take very much to heart in the book.

I do think that in the end, working around the edges and creating little spaces, of commons-based alternatives to capital will never bring about a transformation in our political economy. And so if there's truly to be a commons based future economy, it probably will be gradual, but it will have to be based on this transvestment of a movement of wealth and resources from being under capital control to being under the control of commons based or what I call compeerist-centered entities.

And that would be not just online, but also in the material world or in the material economy.

Bollier: It reminds me of the work I've been doing on what I call relationalized finance, where the idea is to start to assert a different value proposition for the commons, for example, and the decommodified wealth that [00:20:00] is shared by among commoners.

And the goal should be to move money from capitalist circuits of value to commons-based circuits that are protectable as such, so that the wealth doesn't just get reappropriated by capital or business along the way.

And the idea is to start to get serious about the value proposition of the commons and to have a theory about value. My own theory is that living systems are generative, it's just that the value they create isn't necessarily propertized or monetized. I'm thinking of things like ecosystems or gift economies or academic communities.

So I'm really intrigued with compeerism in its taking some of those ideas seriously enough about the alternative value that commons produce, trying to protect them in some more systematic way.

Gerhardt: I fully agree. If there's going to be a transition to a kind of a post-capitalist world and a positive post-capitalist world and one based on the commons, it will necessarily [00:21:00] have to entail a way of being able to value these things that currently our economic system is not able to put any worth to. So there's basically the system that we have now it's all based on exchange value and so this is kind of going back into kind of a Marxist analysis of the economy, but it's all based on exchange value and on what something can fetch on the market. When everything becomes market based and everything becomes commoditized, then there's a large range of things that become undermined or undervalued or not valued at all.

And that can range from the work that's being done in the household that's not appreciated, or the ecosystem services that are being done in nature. And these things simply cannot be captured through a capitalist framework. And so, moving to a commons based economic system would have to allow for ways to value these alternative non-exchange value [00:22:00] values.

And I think that means if we're not going to completely get rid of the market, which I don't think necessarily is the way to go, would be to fundamentally change the way that the market and money work.

Bollier: Are there alternative forms of quantification that you see as useful, or does quantification itself degrade the value?

Gerhardt: I can see the philosophical argument that quantification itself degrades value, but at the same time, I don't think that we can fully get away from quantification. And so, you know, some people that see a more positive future that incorporates these values make the argument that money basically couldn't exist because money always ends up leading to a focus on exchange value.

And I'm not sure that I fully buy that. I think that it would be possible to change the way that money works and change the way that markets work in a way where money can, or where resources, I guess I should say, and wealth can [00:23:00] flow into these alternative projects, which currently are just getting no funding or attention.

Bollier: Let's talk about that a little bit, because the liberal or the politically liberal effort to domesticate the market, to make it more socially respectful or constructive has been really a mixed bag, if not a failure in many respects. At least with federal regulation, it's been difficult to check market abuses given that the market enforces themselves, the corporations, the investors really overrun the legislative and regulatory process.

What would be the strategy then for making markets more socially accountable or answerable to ecological and social needs? I mean, that seems to be a major question in figuring out how to control market abuses in more than a piecemeal social entrepreneurial way that often puts forward the solution. If only we had more Ben and Jerry's of the world, that would solve the problem.

Gerhardt: I suppose that this is where if we're [00:24:00] going to maintain a modern society, if we're not going back to some kind of anarcho-primitivist ideas of what our organization should be. I don't see a way around there being some form of macro-governance that needs to be in place. And so that's where ultimately this impetus has to come from.

And that's why I think that engaging the state is very important. Now, I don't necessarily think that has to be the nation state, you know, it doesn't have to be at the federal level. This can also happen at the local or municipal level, but the rules that govern the market would have to change.

And there would have to be incentives and disincentives in place to be able to direct, wealth and funds into areas that are getting ignored if we're just taking an exchange value approach to things. So... I think the incentives, disincentives within the market is helpful. I think that [00:25:00] ultimately if we could really change the way that money is organized, because right now it is organized in a way that it's primarily controlled by banks, for-profit banks, large corporate banks, then that could go a very long way to help influence where our resources and our wealth flows.

Bollier: You have a chapter in your book in which you talk about money creation and distribution and trying to get beyond bank generated debt as the basis for money. Is this a pipe dream? I mean, we've seen the effects of Bitcoin, which is more of a speculative capitalist thing than something that's really used much for transactions.

And we've seen other gambits for creating alternative currencies in the crypto world. Some people are skeptical of that. There are some successful local and regional currencies like the BerkShares that are overseen by the Schumacher Center and other experiments around the

world, but they don't seem to scale so much or at least the conditions for nurturing them haven't moved along.

Talk to me about how money might be re-engineered. What might be the [00:26:00] most promising strategies for unleashing a non-fiat, non-bank driven currency?

Gerhardt: Well, I think that, first of all, that there's a short-term outlook here and a long term outlook. And I think in the short term, things aren't going to change dramatically with regard to how our money system is organized, I don't think.

And so, you know, the commoners and compeerist aligned entities are going to have to find a way to compete against capital in a money-based context that is not favorable to them at all. And so that is, of course, in the short term, they have to figure out ways of being able to access funds and pooling sources in a way where they can find the funds needed to survive and ultimately to try to expand.

But in the longer term. I think that there are basically two possible paths and the path of creating an alternative currency to the state-based currency that would be centered on a commons-based economy. Sure, that's distant and I suppose could be [00:27:00] seen as a pipe dream. Who knows what's possible in the future?

I do think, theoretically anyways, that it would be possible to create a crypto-based currency that could compete with state-based currencies if there was a large enough commons based economy that embraced that type of currency. So far we don't have anything that really can point to that. And, like you said, even Bitcoin, which is the most successful cryptocurrency is mostly seen as a financial asset to be speculated with and not really used as a means of exchange.

So, you know, maybe that will change. And then there's the question of whether... if those gates are open and if the state allows them to be open, because of course the states might crack down on that, that capital doesn't move in and take over. The other option I would say is if it were possible, and this is of course also a long-term kind of vision, is if it were possible to create a more commons friendly state so that the state actually [00:28:00] were to reclaim essentially its monetary sovereignty.

And become basically the issuer of money, as opposed to it being based on debt based lending, which it is based on now, from large banks.

Bollier: Well, it does seem that there is a kind of struggle over how the state might change in its orientation. And it seems to me at times like a race between authoritarian or fascist approaches, and ones that might host a more progressive commons based approach that genuinely serves more people.

I know, for example, that there's efforts to get commons public partnerships together, especially in cities, which would remake how citizens engage with the state. And there are attempts to do legal hacks on the law to open up spaces for commoning. But you're right, the state is not especially hospitable to the commons because it doesn't tend to generate the kind of tax revenue or have the kind of power, market power, that corporations bring to the table.

So do you have any [00:29:00] theories for how engaging with the state could make some headway?

Gerhardt: I think that probably the first place to start would be on the local level and especially the municipal level. There are a good bit of examples where you can point to an opening up to the commons from the municipal side, especially in Europe where they do see value in a commons based approach and an opening up to the citizenry in determining how funds are spent and things like that. The Bologna regulation in Italy is a prime example of that. So I think that's where you can find the most conducive context for something like this.

But we have seen some success of left-leaning parties in Europe, and usually they end up falling flat. But there does seem to be an interest on the part of the citizenry to find an alternative to the business as usual of capitalist approaches. And here I would say that oftentimes the falling back on the socialist [00:30:00] ideology and socialist plans and coming up with solutions where the state comes in to solve the problem isn't as convincing as it used to be because of multiple failures on the part of the state.

And also, the state being mistrusted for really kind of having sold out the workers time and time again. And so my hope would be that there would be a shift in discourse, in the way that some of these political movements talk about things, that perhaps in the future could garner much broader support and more lasting support.

Bollier: I find that so interesting because the state has such a commitment to centralize market-oriented approaches and being directive as opposed to providing, say, an infrastructure that's empowering. In this age of the internet when there's so much self-actualized participation and initiation of things, we should try to get that energy from the bottom up, some people creatively contributing as opposed to bureaucrats or politicians directing the whole future often for their own political [00:31:00] purposes. I mean, I think it's really interesting the structural struggle that has to be negotiated and resolved somehow. How can the state empower in ways that help it as well as empower ordinary people to have more of their own authority and responsibility in their everyday lives?

Gerhardt: I think that that's right. I find that people tend to be very open to and eager to embrace any approaches where they're given the power to make decisions. And they're very skeptical, especially in the United States, of the state and of a top-down bureaucratic approach to things. And so, it's kind of surprising to me that there hasn't been more of a push within the political realm to reframe the discourse towards decentralizing power, empowering communities, and giving people more say in where our wealth and resources go.

I'm still waiting for that kind of breakthrough to happen. I feel, electorally, from a political perspective, I feel it [00:32:00] would be popular.

Bollier: I agree. I think it's maybe because it breaks the mold in a way that, I think, people in power, politicians, bureaucrats, don't necessarily want to share that power and they want to hold all the reins themselves.

So, the idea of empowering the local or the commons in ways that might turn out unpredictably or might challenge their power, well, maybe they see that as too big of a risk for them to take. At

the same time, the whole lesson of the internet era has been that there's so much power bottom-up energy and creativity.

And certainly at a time when the state is losing trust and legitimacy, the only way to recover that is to reengage in a more productive, constructive conversation with the citizenry. I agree with you that has to happen somehow, but who's going to be first out of the box and make it happen and how?

Gerhardt: This is where there needs to be important work being done in the economy and within civil society to create larger and more effective commons [00:33:00] spaces and commons-based economies, even if they're mini economies that provide clear benefits to the people.

And I think that as that economy grows, even if it's just a sub-economy and relatively small, if it grows enough so people can see it and see the benefit to it, I think it will become more tangible because if we're just talking about theory of what would be good, you know, I don't think people are going to necessarily buy in.

And I should note here that handing power to communities and to people, you know, people are pretty fed up. They realize that the system isn't working. And I think they somehow innately feel that things could be so much better given the technology, the knowledge, the capabilities that we have. Really, things should be better for us.

I think that they feel that instinctively. And so the concern, though, is where do they turn with that anger then towards the way things are? And so I think while compeerism or commons based economy is one answer, is one [00:34:00] discourse that needs to be offered, and hopefully, ultimately, embrace the competition here is the fascist approach to it and to frame everything as a us versus them type of discourse where the feeling is there's not enough for everyone and we need to make sure we get ours as opposed to the compeerist message which is there is clearly...there can be enough for all of us if we just organize ourselves differently.

Bollier: I think that in a very interesting way this comes up as an intellectual and political philosophy competition between liberals on the one hand who want to see the state and policy and a benign market order directing things, versus the idea of a radical redistribution of power at a local and self-organized scale.

I find that myself as a commoner in talking to conventional liberals, they usually can't wrap their minds around the idea of self-organized behaviors being effective or sustainable or, you know, having impact.

Gerhardt: When you say liberals, I guess you're meaning...

Bollier: Social Democrats, [00:35:00] socialists, U. S. liberals.

Gerhardt: You see that a lot in the way that the Commons even gets talked about. I mean, Paul Mason...

Bollier: Just to interject, he's the British author of the book, *Post Capitalism*.

Gerhardt: That's right, yeah. Paul Mason's work on the commons and the radical potential of the digital revolution and how it could enable this abundance, ultimately, he falls back on a rather socialist approach to this, that it's then the state that needs to harness this.

I think, personally, that that's a relatively stale approach, and, again, I'm not sure why necessarily why the... I guess that's just been the discourse that's been the ideology for so long and so that's just the natural fallback is that if it's not working, the state should basically take a bigger role in running things.

And I think it oftentimes just doesn't occur to people that perhaps there's this third way, which is what I like to think of the commons based approach as being in which you have a greater bottom-up empowerment and focus on the community [00:36:00] and a more decentralized way of channeling where wealth and resources go.

Bollier: Well, one important factor in this might be for commoners to create infrastructures. You have a chapter on infrastructures in your book, which I think is an important way to make commoning more normalized and easier and to create the sub-economies that you were talking about. Maybe you could talk a bit about how commons-based infrastructures can decapitalize things, not only in the digital world, but you talk about electricity and information technology infrastructures.

Gerhardt: I get into infrastructure as a kind of a response to the very limited way of looking at the digital revolution as, oh, we have all this digital value, and now we can just distribute it to everyone. And reminding people that there is a physical infrastructure behind this. And ultimately you can't see the digital and the promise of the digital apart from the physical.

And so the infrastructure obviously is that physical part. And as long as that infrastructure is fully controlled by capital, it will [00:37:00] already make it more difficult to access. The possible abundance that is within the digital. A good example of that is just that our access to the internet is increasingly controlled through our data systems.

And so those are based on the cell towers. And of course the cell towers, that comes with a data plan. And so that's a way for capital to, you know, enclose the internet and charge a fee for it. And so the idea is to have a more commons approach to it is to try to make the service of the infrastructure more widely available to people at a fair price. That it's not based on profit and that the organization is based on essentially democratic governance.

And so a good example of that I think is the cooperative approach again, and trying to create, for example, electricity cooperatives that are oftentimes decentralized, controlled from within a locality and municipality and where the people have a say of where do they want their energy to come from, how do they want it distributed, how much ability should they have in contributing to the [00:38:00] grid through their micro energy production? It's empowering and it enables access. Of course, you're not completely free of money here because still embedded in a money based economy, but it's certainly... it can become more affordable and democratic.

Bollier: It reminds me, as a side note, of the infrastructures of book publishing, how you and I as authors have both encountered the difficulties of getting books out to a wider readership of especially commoners through, let's say, the conventional market driven system.

Talk a bit about Open Access Publishing and how this is one limited way to get it out there, but maybe there's a need for a commons-based infrastructure for publishing.

Gerhardt: I think it would be great to have more commons-based infrastructure for publishing. It is not lost on me that one of the main messages of the book is in a sense contradicted by the fact that it is so expensive and difficult to access.

Now, open access, I talk about this in the book, is a way to allow for access, but [00:39:00] it is ultimately not really an undermining of the system, because basically you're paying off the publisher. It's based on gifts or tax money, if the government is supportive of this, to essentially buy off the publisher so that they make the work open access.

And so if there could be an alternative to that, I mean, obviously, if it's only going to be volunteer based, it's going to struggle, right? Because people are embedded in this market economy and they need to feed themselves. But if you could have some more cooperative approaches, nonprofit approaches to publishing that are truly geared towards making the works accessible, then I think that would be helpful.

I mean, we see some of that, obviously, right? There is some of this in play. Largely, it's limited, though, to online publications. So it won't have a physical copy, because that's where the expenses start to go up.

Bollier: Well, let's conclude by you reflecting on how there might be a mass mobilization about these things.

How does political change get affected along these lines? Because at some point this has to be not just a matter of building it out among commoners, [00:40:00] but as something that engages the state and other citizens, something that becomes more political, something that engages with policy and infrastructures at a bigger scale.

Do you have any scenarios that you have in mind for how this might happen, or is this going to be one of those mysteries of cultural change?

Gerhardt: Well, it's probably going to be a mystery of cultural change. I mean, in the end, these kind of larger changes, if they happen, don't happen exactly how anyone thought they would happen.

But it's possible to think through some of these things a little bit and see what kind of elements would be involved. I guess there's many things in play. I think that for one, I think that conditions may become worse for people in terms of climate, in terms of job security, in terms of wealth inequalities.

And I think that as people get more and more dissatisfied, they're going to look for alternatives. So I think that's going to happen. Then I think that that opening needs to be met with a new discourse, a new way of thinking, a new way of approaching the [00:41:00] way we organize our economies. And I think, you know, that the compeerism is one idea. It is not a vanguard ideology; it is open to many different angles and approaches and enactments, but it is distinct from the old socialist ideology. And it is based on the empowerment of the people.

Now people need to realize and see the benefits of this. And so that's what I'm talking about. It is important that at the same time, as there is this political movement, there has to be movement on the economic side so that people can see the benefit and these benefits have to be made clear to them.

The cooperatives that I just mentioned, the electricity cooperatives, that's a good deal for people, but a lot of times they're not aware of it. You know, they all, everybody who's a member of a electricity cooperative, and I'm in a place where they have electricity cooperatives, you know, you have a say in the board that makes the decisions.

You can have a direct impact on how that cooperative is governed. If that cooperative makes a surplus in terms of its money, you get a check back. You know, they say, we don't need this money. It was more than we needed. [00:42:00] Who can you find that would say, 'No, I'd rather have the capitalist option where I'm constantly getting more and more expensive bills, and they're taking me for everything that they can?'

So I think there needs to be that kind of connection between people realizing what the commons is and how it benefits them, and then to translate that into a political thinking. And that political mobilization would, I would imagine, would ultimately coalesce in the form of candidates that would run on these types of platforms, as well as perhaps even an alternative political party, which is more likely in Europe than, of course, in the United States.

And just various types of social movements and non-governmental organizations that are committed to this idea.

Bollier: And I think along those lines, the breakout successes or demonstration of success of different models, whether it's in agriculture or urban commons or digital spaces, when a great example breaks out, it tends to provoke others to emulate it and develop its own momentum.

Well, Hannes, I want to thank you for sharing your time [00:43:00] with me and sketching your vision of the future. It's been really refreshing to have such a broad and -- sure, yeah -- [at] times necessarily speculative consideration of how the commons might grow to larger scales, especially in digital spaces. So again, thank you for offering all of this in your book *From Capital to Commons*.

Gerhardt: Well, thanks so much for having me. It was really a pleasure.